DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 075 101 PS 006 460

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TITLE	Emphasis: Identification.
INSTITUTION	Anchorage Borough School District, Alaska.
SPONS AGENCY	Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	[73]
NOTE	4p.; Preprint of article to be submitted for publication in the "Dean"
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Grade 1; *Identification; Kindergarten Children; *Learning Disabilities; Prediction; *Preschool Children; *Primary Grades; Program Descriptions; Rating Scales; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Boehm Test of Basic Concepts; Elementary Secondary Education Act Title VI G; ESEA Title VI G

ABSTRACT

A potential program for dealing with the identification of kindergarteners with potential learning disabilities is discussed. The subject is dealt with on the level of prediction. It is pointed out that as children learn in different ways, different methods of educating them must be devised. Early identification of disabilities lessens the chances of the failure syndrome. A ranking scale is being developed to allow each kindergarten and/or first grade teacher to rate her class in various areas. One data-gathering device is the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts. Certain high-risk students will be selected for a modified educational program. This program may be replicated later. (CK)

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ED 075101

Article to be submitted for publication in the Dean by Roger Clyne, Title VI-G Psychologist.

EMPHASIS: IDENTIFICATION

The problem of learning disabilities has been recognized and dealt with under a number of generic terms for many years with varying and contradictory results. The emphasis of this project, early identification, attempts to add a new dimension, that will eliminate the typical syndrome of failure and frustration which these children generally experience. Since this program will be dealing with the identification of kindergarten children with potential learning disabilities, we are dealing with a condition which does not yet exist, but which available evidence suggests will develop. As a result, we are dealing with prediction, rather than the simple identification of scholastic success and/or failure.

As educators, we have all probably recognized the child with serious learning disorders which could have been prevented - or at least minimized - had the problem been recognized sooner and an individualized educational program initiated, based upon the child's particular needs and learning style.

PS 006460

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Possessing the knowledge that children learn at different rates and different degrees is not enough. We must realize that they learn in different ways and, therefore, something can and should be done for them. For example, are a child's deficits the cause of his learning disability? Are his problems possibly due to the situation under which he is forced to learn? Could his problems be the result of the interaction of the two previously mentioned factors?

Early identification lessens the chances of the failure syndrome which often includes failure, frustration, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, compensatory misbehavior and ultimately, the possibility of dropping out of school.

In an effort to develop a simple, efficient screening process to identify these children, recent educational and psychological research findings were studied to secure predictive correlates of learning disabilities.

These include such items as perceptual difficulties, motor development problems, attention and concentration disorders, poor concepts of laterality and directionality, deviant activity levels, feelings of failure and misbehavior, greater intra-individual variability and the need for instruction in small increments.

A ranking scale is being developed which will allow each kindergarten and/or first grade teacher to rate her class in most of these areas. In an effort to achieve both accuracy and brevity, each teacher will identify, in rank order, each child in her class who exhibits certain characteristics. After the teacher identifies the high risk students, additional information will be gathered to assist in the selection of students for the modified primary program. This will include parental involvement in securing developmental, family and social data which have been found to influence school functioning. The teacher will be requested to provide additonal information on the child as is necessary. A typical data - gathering device would be the Boehm Test of Basic Concepts.

After acceptance into the program, each child will have further group and individual testing administered to collect information that will assist in planning an education program which will best meet his needs. This will include answering such questions as:

What are his approaches to processing information?
Is his problem one of receiving, processing and associating or expressing information?
What are his strengths and weaknesses in learning visual, auditory and intersensory tasks?
How does he attack a problem in learning?
What behavioral characteristic does he demonstrate?

The process of early identification and psycho-educational evaluation will lead to a form of individualized - prescriptive instruction, based upon each child's particular weaknesses and strengths, learning styles and needs. Resources of the district will be drawn upon as a need is indicated, and outside agencies will be involved if and when district resources prove inadequate.

Since learning disabilities affect between two and 30% of all students, depending upon criteria used, it is assumed that this effort can become an integral part of the regular elementary program.

One of the dangers in early identification is the possibility of establishing a failure expectancy before the child ever begins the first grade. To avoid this hazard, labeling will be avoided and instruction will stress the child's strengths, while attempting to overcome his deficits.

PS 006460

The funding of this project under Title VI-G of the Education of the Handicapped Act for the two year period from 1972-74 will allow development of this program in Anchorage. Later the program, in part or its entirety, will be replicated by other interested districts within the state.

For further information concerning this project, contact Barbara Smart, Ph.D, Title VI-G Director, Denali School, 148 East 9th Avenue, Anchorage, Alaska 99501.